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Homelessness: Critical reflections and observations from an occupational perspective

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Homelessness: Critical reflections and observations from an occupational perspective

Abstract

This comment piece is the result of our critical reflections, observations and discussions in relation to occupation and homelessness, inspired by our participation in the fourth conference of Occupational Science Europe and informed by our research and experiences in the field. Whilst we acknowledge the growing contribution of occupational therapy and occupational science to homelessness, our practices have led us to identify a number of complex factors that impact on this work. In this article we discuss issues that influence the participation of homeless persons in everyday life and make suggestions to support occupational participation. At the macro level, we recognise the importance of definitions and categories of homelessness, how legislation can frame the responsibility of homelessness on individuals and poverty as a causal factor. At the meso level, we explore how charity and power differentials within homelessness services influence participation and propose an occupationally informed approach to homelessness services to enhance meaningful participation. Finally, at the micro level, we focus on interactions with individuals and examine the notion of occupational choice for homeless persons and critique traditional rehabilitative approaches. This comment reflects our own critical awakening as occupational therapists situated within a neoliberal society and the value of collaboration between occupational science and occupational therapy. It reinforces the essential role that critical occupational science plays in knowledge generation by attending to the complex structural, cultural and social factors that influence the choices and occupations of homeless persons, which in turn enhances occupational therapy practice.

Keywords: Homelessness, poverty, occupational therapy, occupational science

Introduction

In line with the increase in numbers of people experiencing homelessness, there is a growing field of practice and research in occupational therapy and occupational science related to homeless persons. This includes work around meaning and well-being (Cunningham & Slade, 2017; Marshall, Lysaght, & Krupa, 2017; Thomas, Gray, & McGinty, 2017) as well as interventions (Gutman & Raphael-Greenfield, 2017; Gutman, Raphael-Greenfield, & Simon, 2015; Lloyd, Hilder, & Williams, 2017). These are positive contributions for understanding occupation for people who are marginalised and the valuable role occupational therapy can play. However, it is our assertion that we need to develop a more critical perspective to inform thinking and practice in homelessness. This comment was inspired by our participation in the fourth conference of Occupational Science Europe: Meeting in Diversity - Occupation as Common Ground and informed by our research and experiences. The first author is currently a research fellow who has over 10 years occupational therapy practice experience in two specialist homeless teams in Dublin, Ireland and completed a PhD researching the transition from homelessness to a sustained tenancy. The second author is a lecturer in occupational therapy who has researched the lived experience of homelessness with a group of men in the south west of England and acted as a supervisor to occupational therapy students within homelessness services over five years. In this comment piece, we have used a critical occupational science approach to explore homelessness, and occupation, in relation to homelessness. Critical theorists such as Foucault (1988) remind us that critical thinking is not just about saying that things are wrong, but about pointing out the assumptions, and unchallenged modes of thought that underpin practice. Our intention therefore, is to raise consciousness of occupational injustices (Whiteford & Townsend, 2011) to advance thinking and practice within this developing field for occupational science and occupational therapy. We agree with the assertion by Gerlach, Teachman, Laliberte-Rudman, Aldrich, and Huot (2017) that within occupational science and occupational therapy, the focus has predominately been on the physical and social dimensions of an immediate environment when considering occupational engagement. This has been at the expense of attending to broader socio-economic, political and historical contexts that dictate occupational opportunities and choices. Analysis of these complex factors is required to understand how communities and

individuals are supported or excluded from engagement in occupations (Hocking, 2012). Within the global context of occupational science, there has been a growing debate about the potential of critical theoretical perspectives to forward the study of occupation from a socially just perspective.

Overview of the structure of the paper

This paper has been guided by a framework, commonly used within social sciences, to present our observations at macro, meso and micro levels (Rimer & Glanz, 2005). We acknowledge that there is a dynamic and complex interplay between the levels. Using this multi-level approach drives analysis beyond merely examining occupational issues at an individual level to highlight the complexity of homelessness. It provides focus on those socio-political/cultural/institutional factors that perpetuate occupational injustices for people who experience homelessness. To begin with, we draw attention to context and structural factors that impact on homelessness at a macro level.

Macro Level – Recognising the influence of policy and poverty

Homelessness is recognised as a global issue (UN Human Rights Council, 2015), although no internationally agreed definition exists (Busch-Geertsema, Culhane, & Fitzpatrick, 2015). The definitions of homelessness used to inform official statistics vary across different countries and organisations and are influenced by the purpose for which they are used, and who collects the figures. Critically, definitions matter because they affect how figures are counted, how the scale of the problem is understood, how policy is developed and implemented, and who is entitled to support as well as public perceptions of homelessness. In the UK context, figures published by the government only include persons that are owed a statutory duty of housing assistance by the local authority, which includes some rough sleepers. Although it is positive that legislation places a duty upon local authorities, this creates a two-tier system (Gousy, 2016). Those who are not eligible—referred to as non-statutory homeless—are typically dependent on charitable and voluntary organisations, including hostels for accommodation, of which there are approximately 35,000 hostel beds in England (Homeless Link, 2016). Additionally, the wording within the UK *Housing (Homeless Persons) Act 1977* stipulates that in order to be eligible for assistance, people

need to be 'homeless through no fault of their own'. The power lies with the local authority to decide who is eligible. The insinuation for those that do not meet the criteria is that they are personally responsible for being homeless.

Whilst many governments tend to use a narrow definition of homelessness, over recent years, typologies, or frameworks of homelessness, have been proposed and adopted by a number of organisations in, for example Canada, Europe and New Zealand (FEANTSA, 2017; Gaetz et al., 2012; Statistics New Zealand, 2009) to recognise the full extent of homelessness. These help to illuminate the variety of physical living situations persons who are counted as homelessness may experience. These range from those who are roofless (or sleep on the streets) to people in inadequate housing (FEANTSA, 2017) and some extend to people at risk of homelessness (Gaetz et al., 2012). Despite the usefulness of typologies in raising awareness of the range of living situations experienced by homeless persons, the focus is generally on the physical environment. However, the Australian Bureau of Statistics definition of homelessness (Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), 2012) widens this to include 'a lack of control and access to space for social relations'. From an occupational perspective, we propose this definition should be developed further to include 'a lack of control, and access to space and resources for occupational engagement'. This expands and challenges the definitions of homelessness that focus solely on the physical environment. An occupational science perspective brings to the fore how persons who experience homelessness, do not have the opportunity to do the everyday things that people in positions of privilege in the domiciled population take for granted, for example, making a hot drink in their own kitchen, or using their own toilet. Occupational science research has recognised that there is an occupational impact when people do not have a space of their own (Chard, Faulkner & Chugg, 2009; Cunningham & Slade, 2017; Marshall, Lysaght & Krupa, 2017). We propose therefore, that occupational scientists should lead on highlighting the connection between inadequate living environments and the day-to-day experiences of occupational inequities and make this more explicit to influence definitions and contribute to interdisciplinary policy development at a macro level.

Beyond definitions and typologies, the challenge of enumerating the extent of homelessness has been recognised. Widely used 'point in time' counts, which are a

snapshot of individuals who experience homelessness at a particular time, are flawed due to their inability to capture an accurate numerical count (Schneider, Brisson, & Burnes, 2016). As an example, Pleace (2016a) purported that women can be undercounted as they may sleep rough, out of sight, for safety, or 'sofa surf' and would therefore not be included in the count. Despite the complexities of counting homeless persons, it has been recognised that across Europe, the number of people experiencing homelessness is growing (FEANSTA & Foundation Abbe Pierre, 2017).

Typically, the causes of homelessness are described at both structural and individual levels (Pleace, 2016b). Structural factors are said to include poverty, housing supply, unemployment and welfare policies. Personal factors include drug and alcohol misuse, poor mental and physical health, lack of social support and relationship breakdowns. Popular stereotypes of homeless persons tend to imply the responsibility for homelessness is on the individuals themselves. This reflects the neoliberal political climate where social issues are seen as individuals' problems (Laliberte Rudman, 2014). However, attention needs to be shifted back to structural roots that contribute to homelessness. Homelessness is not randomly distributed—poverty is central in the route to homelessness and is a key predictor (Bramley & Fitzpatrick, 2017). The probability of experiencing homelessness is closely linked to factors, many of which are outside the control of the individual, and include housing tenure, health, employment and poverty. Fitzpatrick, Pawson, Bramley, and Wilcox (2012) assert that the prevalent media perception, that "we are all only two pay cheques away from homelessness" is, in reality, a misrepresentation. Many members of the population benefit from protective factors that they are afforded by their wider socio-economic, cultural and political circumstances. The media generated discursive practice (Foucault, 1980) that we all have the same risk of becoming homeless, detracts attention from structural inequalities.

Occupational scientists have acknowledged the impact of poverty (Sofa & Wicks, 2017) on occupational deprivation (Whiteford, 1997). Being homeless further restricts access to occupations that others might take for granted. It undermines a person's access to education, work, income and participation in community, which in turn limits occupational possibilities (Laliberte Rudman, 2010). Critical thinking and practice in occupational therapy

must attend to the context of poverty, welfare systems and the structures of homeless services. Our preliminary reflections based on our research, suggest that experiences of occupational deprivation make the transition out of homelessness more difficult (Boland, 2018). Being dependent on services to meet your everyday needs, and the consequent impact on time use, including extended periods of boredom and feeling disempowered to take action perpetuate occupational alienation (Townsend & Wilcock, 2004) even when housed. We want to challenge the assumption that the provision of housing will equate to an instant sense of satisfaction and occupationally meaningful lives. It is our contention that occupation influences the sustainability of the transition out of homelessness, but this requires further research that could in turn influence the structure of services within homelessness.

For people living below the poverty threshold, additional risks to homelessness come about through the structure of the housing market. Private landlords provide a large proportion of rental accommodation and there is a limited availability of affordable or social housing, which helps to perpetuate homelessness. In Europe, generally, the price of housing has increased faster than incomes (FEANSTA & Foundation Abbe Pierre, 2017). An exception is Finland, which has prioritised affordable and appropriate housing as well as the provision of specialised support, based on the Housing First model, as part of its national strategy. Housing First is an approach that offers affordable housing as quickly as possible with flexible support (Tsemberis, 1999). There is no prerequisite to be 'housing ready' or treatment compliant. Housing First has a growing evidence base showing its effectiveness in reducing homelessness (Aubry et al., 2016; Munthe-Kass, Berg, & Blaasvaer, 2016). Occupational therapists can contribute to models such as Housing First by bringing their unique understanding of the occupational nature of human beings and how occupation can support people to fully participate in everyday life and local communities. Roy et al. (2017) proposed occupational therapists could work collaboratively and creatively within Housing First teams, bringing expertise in occupation to promote sustainable community integration outcomes. In addition, drawing on practice within public health, occupational therapists could take an 'upstream' approach (National Collaborating Centre for Determinants of Health, 2014) and work with people in poverty or precarious housing situations to support them to remain housed to prevent homelessness.

Meso Level – working with organisations

A significant number of homeless services are provided by non-statutory charitable organisations. The services they provide include hostel accommodation, day services, food banks, 'soup runs', advice and information. Historically, charity focuses on giving to the needy, and culturally, charities are perceived as valued providers of support beyond the remit of statutory services. However, it is our contention that charitable giving could reinforce ideas of power and oppression (Freire, 1970). Although some occupational science literature has explored the occupational nature of altruism (Smith, 2018; Wright-St Clair et al., 2018), there is a paucity of research exploring the lived experience of receiving charity from an occupational perspective. The complexity of charitable acts was highlighted in an ethnographic study into homeless charities by Guinea-Martin (2013). Giving, without an expectation of a return, provided an avenue for volunteers to show compassion but this had the potential to be experienced by the benefactors as condescending, reinforcing feelings of shame. People experiencing poverty and homelessness are required to interface frequently with charitable organisations for survival, including food banks and shelters. We argue that there is merit in exploring the impact of charitable receiving in relation to how it may disempower occupational aspirations and reinforce occupational injustices, potentially making it more difficult for individuals to leave homelessness.

Within occupational science literature, there is a growing awareness of the impact of contextual factors on occupational choices made by individuals (Gallagher, Pettigrew, & Muldoon, 2015; Galvaan, 2015). Homeless service delivery can significantly impact on individual power and opportunities to enact choice. As an example, a participant in Boland's unpublished PhD study described one of their decisions as an 'awful choice' (Boland, 2018). The choice in question was between sleeping in a hostel or sleeping rough. At face value, the best option might appear to be clear; a hostel bed is likely to be preferable to a night on the streets. The reality was that the choice for the participant was awful because they experienced the hostel as physically threatening. Rough sleeping, although less secure, provided a greater sense of personal control. This confronts the public perception of individual choice to rough sleep and raises a challenge to UK policy that advocates for 'no second night out' (Department for Communities and Local Government, 2011).

Many hostels provide short to medium term accommodation within an institutionalised setting, with a focus on moving individuals into more secure housing. The emphasis is, to a greater or lesser degree, based on a rehabilitative approach. Residents are expected to change their behaviour and/or develop skills to live in their own tenancies (Busch-Geertsema, Edgar, O'Sullivan, & Pleace, 2010). From our experience as researchers, some participants have commented that they do not want 'special classes', or being 'nagged to do things' by staff, rather they express a desire for 'a roof over my head'. To address the potential of the power differential at the interface between the service and the person and guided by the transactional perspective that proposes the reciprocal relationship between persons and their environment (Dickie, Cutchin, & Humphry, 2006), we propose a move to occupationally informed environments. The notion of the psychologically informed environment (PIE) (Johnson & Haigh, 2010) has gained credibility in the homelessness sector in the UK based on the evidence that significant numbers of people who are in contact with homeless services have experienced complex trauma in their lives (Breedvelt, 2016). The PIE approach mandates that services recognise and respond to the psychological and emotional needs of their service users and staff. An occupationally informed service would create a climate where attention is paid to the occupational needs of service users. This would include valuing engagement in personally meaningful occupations as well as acknowledging the function of non-sanctioned occupations (Kiepek, Phelan, & Magalhães, 2014). Additionally, in an adjunct to the psychological approach, an occupationally informed service would hold an occupational justice perspective to consider how the physical, social and cultural environment can impact on occupational opportunities. For example, on one level this could be a review of access to facilities to allow for autonomy in daily living tasks. Attention would also focus on staff training and development to increase the understanding of the occupational nature of human beings, and the value and measurement of occupational outcomes. An occupationally informed environment, would operate at a service, rather than individual level, and contribute to the empowerment of service users.

Micro Level – interactions with individuals

The focus at the micro level is on the individual person and occupational science scholars have developed a body of knowledge related to describing the lived experience of, and

meaning of occupational engagement for, homeless individuals (Chard, Faulkner, & Chugg, 2009; Cunningham & Slade, 2017; Illman, Spence, O'Campo, & Kirsh, 2013; Marshall et al., 2017). This has added valuable understandings of the occupations of daily life for homeless persons and has introduced and elaborated the concept of survival occupations (Cunningham & Slade, 2017; Marshall et al., 2017). Additionally, the literature reinforces the importance of occupations for social connections within homelessness (Chard et al., 2009; Thomas, Gray, & McGinty, 2012) and there are numerous descriptions of how individuals struggle to fill time in meaningful ways (Cunningham & Slade, 2017; Illman et al., 2013; Marshall et al., 2017). In some studies this was resolved by individuals who engaged in pro-social occupations (Cunningham & Slade, 2017) whilst, in others, boredom drove engagement in non-sanctioned (Kiepek et al., 2014) occupations like substance use (Marshall et al., 2017). In Boland's unpublished PhD study (2018) individual participants described how they resisted certain occupations within a shelter environment by choosing not to engage with key working meetings, not attending planned group activities and circumventing hostel rules. In this context, 'not doing' or engaging in non-sanctioned occupations were powerful mechanisms through which individuals demonstrated agency and identity against the oppressive rules dictated at the meso institutional level. Critically, there is scope for occupational science to explore in more depth the values and assumptions placed on engaging and resisting occupation within the homeless context. It seems that a Freirean understanding of power and oppression is called for, where we not only acknowledge the impact of oppression on daily occupations but raise consciousness of how homeless systems constrain or facilitate the development of meaningful occupational lives. Participatory action research could be used as a methodology (Benjamin-Thomas & Rudman, 2018) to raise critical awareness to enable people to take control over their own doing and understand how processes within a service impact on occupational choice and opportunity for individuals.

Supporting individuals to overcome occupational performance difficulties is the traditional territory for many occupational therapists. The profession is developing its practice in the area of homelessness and there are occupational therapy interventions described in the literature (Gutman & Raphael-Greenfield, 2017; Helfrich, Aviles, Badiani, Walens, & Sabol, 2006). Notably, although the value of engaging in meaningful occupations for people who

are homeless is well recognised in the occupational science literature, this is not so well reflected in the interventions described to date. There is a danger that occupational therapy practice, driven by a dominant biomedical model and post-positivist epistemologies, runs the risk of perpetuating the idea that responsibility for homelessness lies solely with the individual. The rehabilitative paradigm suggests that homeless persons are deficient and can be 'fixed' (Farias, 2017) . This paradigm does not pay attention to the broader socioeconomic and political factors that influence homelessness. Critical occupational science illuminates how macro and meso processes impact on occupational opportunities and engagement (Benjamin-Thomas & Rudman, 2018; Farias, Laliberte Rudman, & Magalhães, 2016; Hammell, 2011). Drawing on this understanding, occupational therapy can enact practices to work against occupational inequities at all levels of homelessness including advocating for occupational rights and opportunities at an organisational and policy level.

Conclusion

It is important to reiterate that this comment piece drew upon conversations and reflections based on our individual practice and ongoing research with persons experiencing homelessness. Attendance at the OSE 2017 conference inspired our own critical awakening to the factors that perpetuate homelessness, and a heightened awareness of power differentials, which challenged us to examine these within our experiences. Although we acknowledge that this is not an exhaustive review, we have drawn attention to those issues that seem most pertinent to future occupational science and occupational therapy practice and research within homelessness. This included how policies and structures impact on injustices, an examination of the power relationships between organisations and the people who use their services, and a critical scrutiny of motivations for action at an individual level.

Occupational science has a unique perspective to offer within the field of homelessness, highlighting occupational injustices and the impact of occupational deprivation on the everyday lives and opportunities of persons experiencing homelessness. We argue that it is our social responsibility to harness critical discourses in occupational science and move towards a praxis-orientated approach to address homelessness.

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